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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2553, TFLE01: DEFENSE MINISTER MURR CONFIDENT IN RAPID

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2553	2006-08-08 05:25	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL//NOFORN	Embassy Beirut

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 002553

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/07/2016

TAGS: MOPS PREL PTER LE IS SY

SUBJECT: TFLE01: DEFENSE MINISTER MURR CONFIDENT IN RAPID LAF DEPLOYMENT

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) During an August 7 meeting with the Ambassador and TDY poloff (notetaker), Lebanese Defense Minister Elias Murr confidently claimed that 15000 LAF troops, if called upon, could begin deploying to the South within 12 hours. (Note: this meeting took place before the cabinet decision authorizing deployment of that number after a full Israeli withdrawal. End note.) Following this deployment, the LAF would require assistance from the Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, in the provision of additional equipment to support their permanent presence in the South. Murr stated clearly that the LAF was prepared to hit back at Hizballah if they attempted to fire at Israel or tried to draw Israeli fire by placing launchers near to LAF positions. Turning to the draft UNSC resolution, Murr cautioned that without a clear solution to the Sheba'a Farms issue, the GOL would not be able to undercut Hizballah's pretext for remaining in the South and would therefore have a much harder time dislodging them. Murr also supported the idea of a beefed-up UNIFIL with a close coordination mechanism - such as a Joint Operations Room (long a demand of the international community) - for quickly passing messages between the LAF and IDF. End Summary.

ASSESSING THE CURRENT CONFLICT

¶12. (C) In contrast to his earlier dismissals that Israel had significantly harmed Hizballah, Murr claimed that Hizballah had suffered losses of 50 percent of its equipment as well as 400 fighters during the conflict. While he estimates that Hizballah has fired off 3000 of its rockets, he believes that the Syrians were able to resupply Hizballah with 2500 before the Israelis took out the road links. Murr believes that the time for a cease-fire is now. The Israelis will find it much harder to pick off individual rocket emplacements hidden in towns and villages without causing significant civilian casualties and more international uproar. Furthermore, according to Murr, the entire Lebanese populace, including the Shi'a, are tired of the conflict and want a cease-fire. This works to the advantage of the cease-fire actually holding.

¶13. (C) As to the potential for an escalation of the conflict, such as a Hizballah attack on Tel Aviv, Murr does not see that as likely. Murr said that the decision to strike Tel Aviv with Zilzal 1 and Zilzal 2 missiles would have to come from Tehran. Israel would have to strike downtown Beirut, which Murr thinks will not happen. When asked whether Hizballah might cynically move a rocket launcher into Solidere in order to draw Israeli aerial fire, Murr dismissed this as "impossible." Saying that he had 3000 LAF troops stationed in Beirut, Murr scoffed, "Hizballah cannot launch a rocket from Solidere. I have too many soldiers there." He also claimed that three days ago the LAF successfully interdicted a Hizballah-bound container of rockets and impounded them in the Ministry of Defense, refusing to release them to Hizballah.

"COUNT ON ME FOR THE DEPLOYMENT"

¶14. (C) When asked about the LAF's ability to deploy to the South, Murr replied that he could have 15,000 troops begin deployment to seven sectors in the South within 12 hours of a ceasefire. Pulling out a rough map, Murr elaborated on the troop deployment numbers in the various sectors (Note. These geographic sectors are estimates based on a quick glimpse at the map. End Note.):

2,500 troops southwest of the Litani to the Blue Line (60 M48 tanks)
2,500 southeast of the Litani to the Blue Line (60 M48 tanks)

2,000 northwest of the Litani up to Sidon (60 M48 tanks)
2,000 northeast of the Litani around An-Nabatiyeh (60 M48 tanks)

- These two sectors would be augmented by another 1000 troops

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already stationed just to the north of them.

2,000 north of the Blue Line roughly above Sheba'a Farms
2,000 north of that sector on the other side of Jabal Bi'r ad-Dahr
1,000 northeast of those sectors

¶5. (C) Murr said that he planned to recall 12,000 reservists (something announced in the Lebanese press on 8/7), which he said would take 12 days, and to cancel all leave for the entire army of 43,000. He added that the LAF, once deployed, will need to receive additional equipment and support from Arab nations, particularly Saudi Arabia, and that he would need U.S. assistance in making that request. "With a push from you, we can get from the Arab countries the equipment that we need."

¶6. (C) Murr did not mention whether or not the LAF would assume Hizballah's weapons and positions in the South. When asked if he really thinks Hizballah will peaceably accept this arrangement, Murr challenged, "Let them play with the Lebanese army. When we're in the South, anyone who moves, we'll shoot at. No joke." He also thinks that Nabih Berri will have to accept this plan, thereby providing at least some Shi'a buy-in. Murr urged though that the international community support this endeavour by providing a clear answer on the Sheba'a Farms issue, thereby weakening Hizballah's pretext for continuing the resistance. "With a political agreement, no more resistance."

¶7. (C) Responding to the suggestion that the Israelis will be skeptical as to the LAF's ability to assume security in the South, Murr said that he supports the idea of a beefed-up UNIFIL lending assistance to the LAF mission. He agrees with establishing a joint operations room with UNIFIL in order to quickly transmit messages to the IDF in the event of a Hizballah attack launched from the South, with an eye to also forestalling an Israeli response which might take out LAF positions. When asked, Murr said he supports having UNIFIL or UNTSO monitor points of entry, including ports and airports, in order to reassure the Israelis that Hizballah will not be resupplied.

COMMENT

¶8. (C/NF) This meeting with Murr took place just a few hours before the cabinet took its historic decision to deploy 15,000 troops to the south upon Israeli withdrawal behind the Blue Line -- a decision that, had it occurred any time before Hizballah's July 12 hijacking operation -- would have been hailed by the international community. From the maps and files Murr had, planning was already well underway for this potential deployment before the cabinet decision. The fact that the cabinet unanimously approved this proposal, with little debate, indicates that Hizballah is fully on board. Hizballah's acquiescence in a deployment that it had strenuously opposed since the Israeli withdrawal from the south in May 2000 suggests that Hizballah is now ready for a cease-fire. If we can use this cabinet decision (and other steps) to encourage an early withdrawal, Hizballah (on top of whatever military losses it has suffered) is harmed politically, as we can emphasize the fact that the LAF deployment, not Hizballah's weapons, is what achieved the Israeli withdrawal.

¶9. (C/NF) We still need to examine, however, how best to achieve not just a simple cease-fire but a sustainable cease-fire. That will require more than 15,000 LAF troops, no matter how confidently Murr praises their commitment and abilities. We also suggest that we begin consultations on an urgent basis with Gulf Arabs in providing needed equipment to the LAF on an accelerated basis. Whatever the final formula for the hoped-for sustainable cease-fire, the LAF will surely play a role, especially in light of this cabinet decision, and the more quickly we can assemble equipment, the better.

FELTMAN